

Content and Contention: can museums present controversial issues?

Research carried out by participants in the international project "Exhibitions as contested sites – the role of museums in contemporary society", show a willingness among visitors and those who work in museums for difficult and controversial topics to be presented. Some subjects are perceived as more difficult to confront than others. In this paper, I will examine a number of examples of museums that I admire for the manner in which they have set about presenting contentious material. I will then draw some conclusions that may provide useful guidance.

Both the Tower Museum in Derry and the Ulster Museum in Belfast have addressed the fact that Northern Ireland is deeply divided along sectarian lines. It takes a particular courage to acknowledge division and then to examine its manifestations, particularly when one of these manifestations is violence that has resulted in so much death and destruction.

The Tower Museum has as its origin the very Troubles themselves. A reconstruction of one of the medieval towers on the walls of Derry was chosen to house this museum, which tells the story of the city and its surroundings from the prehistoric period to the present day. While the Iron Age presents few problems, by the time we come to the seventeenth century there are two distinct versions of history: one based on the Nationalist/Republican/Catholic tradition and the other following the Loyalist/Unionist/Protestant conventions. The very name is contested: it is Derry to the

former and Londonderry to the latter (note that I am following the usage of the democratically elected council). From the seventeenth century the museum display divides, with displays organised in such a way that it is possible to follow both versions of history in parallel. Despite this, the Tower Museum does not produce one, agreed, history of Derry. Rather, it successfully acknowledges that both versions of history have validity, with the possibility that members of each community may, perhaps grudgingly, accept that the other has its interpretation of history. It is by such hesitant steps that the road to peace is trodden. Derry suffered grievously in the Troubles, with the civil rights march that ended in the carnage of Bloody Sunday, bombs that destroyed or badly damaged half the buildings within the walled city and a series of sectarian assassinations. Yet it also had a de facto ceasefire, years before the peace process gained momentum. In a city with so many contradictions, the bravery of the Tower Museum is rewarded with the admiration of both communities.

The recent application to the Heritage Lottery Fund for funding to create a display based on the wreck of the Spanish Armada vessel *la Trinidad Valencera* as an addition to the *Story of Derry* exhibition in the Tower Museum was accompanied by letters of commendation from both John Hulme, leader of the (mainly Catholic) SDLP and Ian Paisley of the (Protestant) Democratic Unionists. This exhibition is currently being designed, and because it will deal with a sixteenth century power struggle for dominance in Europe between Catholicism and Protestantism, the exhibition should provide another perspective on the divisions in present day Derry.

The Ulster Museum in Belfast is part of the National Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland. In 2001, the museum staged an exhibition titled *Icons of Identity*. The

display consisted of objects associated with each of the two major factions in the Irish community mixed together in a structured, thought provoking manner. Thus a sash of the Orange order found itself in the company of a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary while a photograph of music group the Corrs rubbed shoulders with a Rangers football club scarf. One particularly challenging context was the display of Michael Collin's revolver near one of the rifles brought to Ulster by Sir Edward Carson. Another section of the exhibition featured instances where identities intersected, most notably in the image of the hero of ancient Irish myths, Cuchulainne. To show how he is claimed by both communities, two sets of mural painters, whose sectarian images can be found on terraced gable ends in Loyalist and Republican areas of Belfast, were commissioned to produce images of the Ulster hero.

Icons of Identity was a brave exhibition to stage with inevitable reactions from visitors, some of whom were angered by the content, especially the juxtapositions of objects. Because of the contentious nature of the exhibition, a 'cooling off' room was provided in which staff and visitors were invited to write their responses to the material presented in the exhibition on cards which were then pinned to a board. All comments were carefully collected by the museum, including those that alleged bias on the part of the staff: some visitors thought they detected a Republican bias while others suspected that the staff were pro-Unionist. All too often the comments book or its equivalent is a token: not so at the Ulster Museum. Treating visitor feedback regarding museum displays seriously is much rarer than it should be. In this instance, the feedback was a vital part of the exhibition. The peace process in Ireland can only succeed if each community recognises that the history and culture (and therefore the future) of the other

is not only valid but intertwined with its own. *Icons of Identity* made a notable contribution to that goal.

Similarly, there are museums in Germany that have been bold in confronting the presentation of the Nazi era. The German Museum of Technology in Berlin displays an object that at first appears to be a mundane item of railway rolling stock: a goods wagon. However, the fact that this wagon was used to take Jews to concentration camps creates a grim aura about the object; to step inside is an emotionally challenging experience. The same museum staged a courageous exhibition about the science and technology of the Third Reich, including links with companies operating in Germany now. Even exhibitions that would not seem to have Nazi Germany as their focus can provide interesting insight into the era when cultural institutions choose to include certain material. For example, an exhibition at the Museum of Technology and Transport in Mannheim about radio broadcasting displayed annual photographs of the staff of the regional radio station throughout the thirties. In 1934, a group appears dressed not in a mix of civilian clothes, but in the uniforms of the Nazi party, a reminder that most Germans experienced Hitler's speeches through the medium of radio rather than at the Nuremberg rallies.

Another museum that should be admired for its role in a contemporary understanding of a difficult period in German history is the House of History in Bonn. This museum presents the history of the post-war period in Germany from the death camps and refugees, through the divided nation, the economic miracle and on to reunification. It stages lively debates on current issues and temporary exhibitions that are sometimes controversial such as *Resistance and Opposition in the GDR* and *Everyone is*

a Stranger Somewhere (about refugees and guest workers).

Museums in Europe have often played an important role in dealing with the enmities between nations that resulted in and from two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century. In 2000, the In Flanders Fields Museum at Ypres (Ieper) in Belgium was awarded the Council of Europe prize for the way in which it presented the horrors of the battles of the Great War that killed more than half a million soldiers and non-combatants, and destroyed the town itself. One of the ways that this museum engages with visitors to enrich their appreciation of these events is through a smart-card issued to each visitor. Each card carries the identity of a real individual caught up in the conflict; it might be a Belgian, French, German, British, Australian, or Indian soldier, a nurse or even a civilian inhabitant of the town. Visitors discover the fate of the person, as presented by their family, from terminals as they proceed through the chronological account of the war and its aftermath, allowing them a rare personal insight to be considered in tandem with the other displays and exhibits. Through this and other means, the museum's approach is to remember the dead and provide reconciliation for the living, on the understanding that the wounds of war take generations to heal. This sits well with the general disposition of the city: Ypres has adopted the title 'City of Peace'. One of the museums looking at the Second World War from the perspective of a number of different combatants from different sides is the Memorial Museum in Caen in France (also known as the Museum of the Battle of Normandy). This museum describes itself as the 'Museum of Peace'. It serves visitors of all nationalities from both sides of the Second World War, who share an emotional experience together. Even though a visitor may leave these museums feeling disturbed, they also leave with a sense of understanding which is

important.

The Ann Frank House in Amsterdam is one of the most visited museums in the Netherlands: numbers have grown from 9,000 in 1960 to 913,000 in 2003. At first, it is hard to understand how so many people entering small hiding places in such a modest house could possibly have a worthwhile experience. In fact, visiting this site is deeply moving, despite the crowds. Recently, the museum added an extension to better enable it to carry out what has always been one of its major goals: to combat racism in all its forms. Considering the recent increase in far right violence against minorities in Europe, this is a difficult and important task that will certainly continue to be vital in the future.

Another place where difficult subject matters are addressed and presented is in some Russian museums. For example, there are two museums in Siberia that have been engaged in work with the Memorial Society, established to uncover the truth about the gulags by survivors as well as people whose relatives had perished. In both Salekhard and Krasnoyarsk, exhibitions were staged about Stalin's doomed attempt to build a railway across northern Siberia. Items recovered by the Memorial Society from work camps along the route of the railway provide vivid insights into the privations suffered by hundreds of thousands of people banished to the Arctic Circle.

In Australian museums, I have been impressed by the platform provided for indigenous people to tell their story and to start to achieve recognition, especially the Indigenous Australians exhibition at the Australian Museum, and an exhibition on contemporary Aboriginal performing arts at the Powerhouse Museum. Since taking up my role as CEO of Museum Victoria in 2002, I have been able to observe first hand the role of *Bunjilaka*, the Aboriginal centre at Melbourne Museum. This is a very special

place, established with the full involvement and support of the Koori community, featuring a lively activities program and a membership scheme that hundreds of people have joined. A crucial factor in its success is the implementation of the Aboriginal Employment Strategy. In *Down Under*, Bill Bryson writes of the 'invisibility' of Aboriginal people in much of Australia. It is through projects like *Bunjilaka* that non-Indigenous Australians can meet and talk with their Indigenous compatriots, achieving levels of understanding that are impossible without personal contact between individuals. Another policy that contributes towards Reconciliation is the repatriation of human remains and secret/sacred objects. I recently took part in the return of the remains of the Jaara baby to the Dja Dja Wurrung people. The benefits in terms of mutual respect that flow from repatriation far outweigh the value of keeping the remains in the museum's collection.

Museum Victoria continues to address contentious issues. *Getting In* is a gallery at the Immigration Museum that traces the history of Australian immigration policy to the present day. It does what museums do best, by providing an historical perspective supported by real objects, personal stories and documents that together illuminate current issues. The centrepiece is an interview booth in which visitors are placed in the role of immigration officers, and after watching a video interview with prospective immigrants (played by actors), they are asked to decide on their eligibility to enter Australia against the criteria of the particular period. It is at times both illuminating and distressing. *Cooking Stories* is an exhibition about the experience of refugees from countries such as Eritrea, Afghanistan, Russia and Vietnam told through food and ingredients associated with an important meal or event. The refugees cooked dishes which were then freeze

dried and treated by our preparators in order to last through the term of the exhibition.

This works because it is simple and direct, linking the experience of the individual refugee or asylum seeker with that of the visitor in a way that a more strident display could not. Another contentious exhibition that the Immigration Museum currently has on display is *Death: Mortality and Religious Diversity*. Developed in partnership with Deakin University, this exhibition examines how eight different groups in Victoria deal with death: representatives of Moslem, Hindu, Christian (Catholic, Anglican, Greek Orthodox), Jewish, Buddhist faiths and those with no religion contributed to the content.

I have examined these exhibitions in detail because the research of the international project "Exhibitions as contested sites-- the role of museums in contemporary society" showed that those questioned were unsure whether some topics were suitable for museum exhibitions. Doubtful subjects included refugees and death. Other 'difficult' subjects were identified as genetic diseases and terrorism. My view is that there is no subject that a museum cannot tackle if it adopts the right approach. In the *Medical Melbourne* display at Melbourne Museum, an interactive allows visitors to explore issues around genetic testing for inherited illness. It was developed in partnership with the Murdoch Children's Research Centre and is based around interviews with a number of people affected by genetic disorders. The Museum of Science and Industry in Manchester that I directed before moving to Australia dealt with the destruction of the city centre by a huge IRA bomb in June 1996 and the rebuilding that followed the act of terrorism. The focus of this exhibition was not on terrorism itself, but rather on the impact of terrorism and how the city had to reinvent itself after this event. Another display gave two accounts of the Peterloo Massacre in which many died when a

demonstration for Reform was broken up by the militia. One account showed the incident from the perspective of a demonstrator, the other from that of the authorities who feared insurrection. Museums could do more to adopt techniques to reflect the fact that many historical and contemporary issues are subject to debate without a 'right' answer. A current exhibition at the Ann Frank House about freedom of expression and freedom from religious persecution adopts that approach. Australian examples could be the Eureka uprising, Ned Kelly, the appropriate population for Australia and the effects of global warming.

Museums can make a real contribution to the understanding of contentious issues, especially:

1. Where there is an historical perspective that aids understanding of contemporary issues
2. Where there is a scientific perspective provided by researchers in the museum or in associated institutions
3. Where the museum's collection contains objects and information that aid understanding
4. Where there is the opportunity to show differences in interpretation
5. Where there is a cultural perspective
6. Where preconceptions can be challenged

However, there are some instances where museums can hinder the interpretation of difficult subjects. Therefore, museums should take particular care to avoid issues such as:

1. Becoming unwitting proponents of sectional interests through naivety
2. Accepting exhibitions from non-Museum sources without careful scrutiny;
others may not have the same ethical standards as a museum would be expected to have.
3. Finding themselves as proponents of a 'new orthodoxy' in which only a
narrow range of views are tolerated
4. Courting controversy in an attempt to be noticed
5. Becoming the mouthpiece of individual Board members' beliefs

Finally, there are some contentious issues that museums should not try to engage in, for example, subjects that are very topical. Newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the internet are far better equipped to deal with breaking news than museums can possibly hope to be. Museums should also recognise their limitations as platforms for problem solving. As Kenneth Hudson wrote in *Museums of Influence*:

Being aware of a problem does not necessarily mean that one is personally called upon by God to solve it. Museums seem ill adapted to be problem solving agencies, although they may have a useful role to play in illustrating the nature of the problem (Hudson).